Mastercard Denies Pressuring Steam To Censor ‘NSFW’ Games [Update: Valve Responds]

The company said it only requires standards 'based on the rule of law'

Censorship itch.io Steam

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Mastercard has broken its silence after being thrust into the middle of a gaming culture war between anti-porn advocates and anti-censorship activists. While Valve previously laid blame for a recent purge of adult sex games from Steam at the feet of “payment processors and their related card networks and banks,” Mastercard released a statement on Friday denying any responsibility for a new wave of censorship that’s recently led some gamers to flood payment company call centers with complaints.

“Mastercard has not evaluated any game or required restrictions of any activity on game creator sites and platforms, contrary to media reports and allegations,” the company wrote in a statement published on its website on August 1. “Our payment network follows standards based on the rule of law. Put simply, we allow all lawful purchases on our network. At the same time, we require merchants to have appropriate controls to ensure Mastercard cards cannot be used for unlawful purchases, including illegal adult content.”

Mastercard and Visa have been on the receiving end of an anti-game censorship backlash after anti-porn group Collective Shout claimed victory in a write-in campaign targeting payment company CEOs for allegedly profiting off of what the group called “violent pornography.” Critics of the move recently told *Kotaku* they’ve been calling the companies multiple times over the last week to complain about Valve and indie game shop itch.io purging seemingly legal NSFW content

from their platforms over fears of reportedly being dropped by Mastercard and others.

To be clear, Mastercard doesn't say it hasn't been involved at all, just that it's gone no further than enforcing its existing guidelines against "unlawful purchases, including illegal adult content." But a renewed crackdown on those requirements, which can be vague in practice, has resulted in Valve and itch.io delisting anywhere from hundreds to thousands of games they worry could get it in trouble with Mastercard and others.

Earlier today, itch.io founder Leaf Corcoran announced the indie storefront is bringing back delisted NSFW games that were free, but is "still in ongoing discussions with payment processors" over paid content which will be reintroduced "slowly." It could suggest the recent call-in campaigns castigating the credit card companies have changed the calculus for the companies involved. It certainly sounds like Mastercard regrets ever being dragged into this fight, even though it's the one in the driver's seat.

Updated: 8/1/2025 4:18 p.m. ET: In a statement to *Kotaku*, a spokesperson for Valve said that while Mastercard did not communicate with it directly, concerns did come through payment processor and banking intermediaries. They said payment processors rejected Valve's current guidelines for moderating illegal content on Steam, citing Mastercard's Rule 5.12.7.

"Mastercard did not communicate with Valve directly, despite our request to do so," Valve's statement sent over email to *Kotaku* reads. "Mastercard communicated with payment processors and their acquiring banks. Payment processors communicated this with Valve, and we replied by outlining Steam's policy since 2018 of attempting to distribute games that are legal for distribution. Payment processors rejected this, and specifically cited Mastercard's Rule 5.12.7 and risk to the Mastercard brand."

Rule 5.12.7 states, “A Merchant must not submit to its Acquirer, and a Customer must not submit to the Interchange System, any Transaction that is illegal, or in the sole discretion of the Corporation, may damage the goodwill of the Corporation or reflect negatively on the Marks.”

It goes on, “The sale of a product or service, including an image, which is patently offensive and lacks serious artistic value (such as, by way of example and not limitation, images of nonconsensual sexual behavior, sexual exploitation of a minor, nonconsensual mutilation of a person or body part, and bestiality), or any other material that the Corporation deems unacceptable to sell in connection with a Mark.”

Violations of rule 5.12.7 can result in fines, audits, or companies being dropped by the payment processors.